

Statement on the Death of Representative Steven Schiff March 26, 1998

I was deeply saddened to hear that Congressman Steve Schiff has died after a courageous year-long battle with cancer. Hillary and I extend our sympathies to his wife, Marcia, and their two children. Steve's constituents in the First Congressional District of New Mexico and

people across America have lost an effective legislator and an honorable public servant.

His work on behalf of this Nation will long be remembered. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family during this difficult time.

Interview With Tavis Smiley of Black Entertainment Television in Cape Town March 26, 1998

President's Visit to Africa

Mr. Smiley. Mr. President, nice to see you. Thanks for talking to us. Let me start by asking you how you're holding up. I'm having—it's my first time traveling in the White House press pool; I'm tired of trying to keep up with you. You must be tired.

The President. Yes, I have a couple periods during the day still where I get a little tired or jet-lagged. We've been traveling at night a lot. But the trip is so exciting it kind of keeps the adrenalin flowing.

Mr. Smiley. Let me ask you, if I can, Mr. President, to share your impressions of Africa. You at this point have now visited three African countries, three quite diverse African countries. I'm wondering if you can share your impressions; is Africa what you expected it to be upon your arrival?

The President. Yes, it's what I expected it to be, but it's even more interesting, more fascinating than I thought it would be. It's a place that's just brimming with energy and, I think, basic good will on the part of the citizens of the countries that I met. I think it's a place of great opportunity for the United States. I think it's a place that we should be far more concerned about than we have been in the past and a place that can be a good partner for us in dealing with the challenges of this new century we're about to enter.

Mr. Smiley. And to move, if I can, from talking about the continent to the content of some of what you've had to say—and I'm wondering specifically, Mr. President, how you think some

of your remarks are going to play back home, particularly to those outside of the African-American community? You've made some rather provocative statements; many African-Americans have been pleased by those remarks. You said in Ghana that we all came out of Africa; folks were surprised to hear you say that. In Uganda, you said that everyone—that European-Americans, rather, had benefited from the fruits of the slave trade and that we were wrong in that as well. In Rwanda, you said we didn't move fast enough to deal with the genocide happening there. Some provocative statements, again, pleasing the African-American community in large, I think, but how do you think those provocative statements are going to play outside of the black community?

The President. Well, I would hope that they would play well. At least, I hope that they would prompt all my fellow Americans to think. What I said about us all coming out of Africa is, as far as we all know, absolutely accurate. That is, the oldest known species of humanity from all the archaeological and anthropological studies are people who were in Africa. We just—I just read an article about two people walking upright, where they found footprints that are 2 million years old right near where we're doing this interview. So that's just a simple fact.

When I talked about the slave trade, I meant that when I was in Uganda. The Europeans basically organized the slave trade. They yanked Africans out of their lives and turned them into slaves. But Americans bought them, and therefore, we were part of the slave trade. Quite

apart from the injury to the slaves that were in America, what we did to Africa was wrong. And I thought it was important to acknowledge that, that it wasn't just—that Americans weren't just simply passive in that.

And finally, I think we all recognize that the world was not particularly well organized for the breathtaking speed of the genocide in Rwanda. Take it out of Africa—if you look at what happened in Bosnia, where many, many people were killed and millions were dislocated, it took the international community more than 2 years to get organized enough for the U.N. to support a NATO action that NATO took and then for NATO to come in with our allies—Russia and the others, many other countries, two dozen other countries—to stop the killing in Bosnia and effect a peace settlement.

In Rwanda, where you had a million people killed in 90 days, it is simply a fact that the United States, Europe, Japan, and the whole United Nations, the whole world community—we were not organized for or prepared for the consequences.

I'm proud of what the United States did when we finally got to Rwanda. We saved hundreds of thousands of people's lives who were refugees, children who might have died from dehydration and disease, for example. But I think this is the—what happened in Rwanda should be a clear message to not just Americans but to the world community that these are things that we can stop from happening and keep countries on a more positive course if we're well organized.

And it was particularly tragic in Rwanda, because Rwanda is not a country that was created by European colonial mapmakers. It was a coherent entity long before colonialism in Africa. And the Hutus and the Tutsis lived together literally for centuries, speaking the same language, having the same religious practices, dividing their society on lines that were quite different from tribal lines. So it was a world-class tragedy.

Mr. Smiley. Let me ask you whether or not these, as I termed them earlier, provocative comments that you made were planned. I talked to a lot of folks in the White House pool, and no one will tell me that they had any idea that you were going to make the kinds of statements you've been making. I'm wondering whether or not, then, these statements were planned or whether you got caught up in the moment

where the emotion is overtaking you. Were they planned remarks?

The President. One was planned, and two were remarks that I thought I ought to say to try to get the American people to identify more closely with Africa and then to look to the future—to a common future.

We clearly planned to acknowledge the deficiencies of the United States and the world community in dealing with the Rwanda genocide. The Secretary of State had already been here and done the same thing, and I thought it was important that I do it as well, to focus the attention of the world on what we have to do to keep things like this from happening in the future, not just in Africa but everywhere.

The comment about our involvement in the slave trade and what it did to Africa, as well as what it did to African-Americans who became slaves, was a comment that I decided to make based on my feelings about the situation and my reading of what would be appropriate.

The comment about how we all came out of Africa was—I think is just—to the best of our knowledge, is simply an anthropological fact and that Americans ought to know that. I don't think—I got interested in this because Hillary spent a lot of time over the last 2 years studying the origins of humankind, and I learned a lot through her extensive reading and study. And I think that it's one more way to make all Americans identify with Africa and with the common humanity we share with people across the globe.

Mr. Smiley. I know you're leaving in just a moment to go speak to Parliament here in Cape Town, South Africa, so let me squeeze out a couple quick questions, and I'll let you go. I'm wondering whether or not you think this trip is going to dispel the negative stereotypes and myths about Africa. You've said repeatedly you want to put a new face on Africa for Americans.

My sense is that a lot of what's happening here, certainly much of what's happening here, in my own judgment, is not being portrayed accurately by the American media, some things being taken out of context. I'm thinking now specifically of the incident in Ghana when the crowd lunged first. I know you were concerned about people on the front line. That was not initially portrayed by the American media as accurately as it should have been. I'm wondering whether or not you think that the trip ultimately will dispel the myths about Africa that you're concerned about, or do you think that what you

are trying to do, your efforts are in some way being overshadowed by some press people who insist on raising questions on other matters that have nothing to do with why you are here in Africa.

The President. Oh, no. Well, I think that the trip is getting, I think, basically constructive, positive, and accurate coverage back home, as nearly as I can tell. Now, in Ghana, where we had a half million people—and more if you count the people who were right outside the square there—there was a little metal fence dividing me from the people. And when I was shaking hands, the enthusiasm of the crowd was such—and this has happened to me in America, not just in Ghana, but it's the biggest crowd I've ever spoken with—there were two women there who were—and it was over 100 degrees; keep in mind it was very hot, and they had been out there a long time—and they couldn't breathe. They were literally being crushed against the fence. So what I was worried about was that just the crowd, the enthusiasm and the happiness, the ardor of the crowd would inadvertently cost those women their lives. And I was just trying to help them. But it was a wonderful, wonderful event.

I think basically this trip will end a lot of the stereotypes that people have. I think people tend to think that—who don't know much about Africa—that all they ever read is when there are troubled tribal societies and they're fighting with each other or there's one more military coup or one more failed democracy. And half the countries in sub-Saharan Africa have elected leaders of their own choosing. They're more and more interested in market economies. They're struggling to provide basic education and other services like health. And they're very interested in being a part of the world of the 21st century. And the people are so energetic, and they're intelligent people who are looking to the future.

And what I want Americans to do is to imagine what we can do with Africa in the future as partners. I believe that this trip will contribute to that, and I certainly hope it will.

Addressing the Legacy of Apartheid and Slavery

Mr. Smiley. Let me ask you, finally, Mr. President—I mentioned earlier that you are headed to speak to Parliament as soon as we leave here—as soon as you leave here. I am told that you may, may, in fact, speak to the issue of apartheid and America's complicity in that cer-

tainly for many, many years. How would you respond to particularly African-Americans back home who ask of their President, respectfully, how he could address apartheid in Africa and not address America's version of apartheid, the legacy of slavery and segregation, back at home?

The President. Well, I would say that we are addressing the legacy of slavery back home, that this race—we addressed apartheid with the Civil War, with the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, later with all the civil rights legislation. I think it's plain that there is a deep determination in America to overcome the mistakes of our past and the injustice we did.

But the race initiative that I set up in America is focused on the future. I think the same thing should be done here. While it is true that the American Government for many years, in effect, was complicit in the apartheid in South Africa by the cooperation with and support of the South African Government, it's also true that Americans had a lot to do with ending apartheid here by the sanctions, the legislation that swept cities and States across the country that the Congress eventually put forward at the national level.

So I think Mr. Mandela would say that Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds had a lot to do with creating the international climate of opposition to apartheid in South Africa.

But what we need to be doing today in South Africa and in the United States is dealing with the legacy of apartheid here and slavery and racial discrimination there, insofar as it still needs to be stamped out, but our focus ought to be on the future. The only way we can liberate people from the problems of the past is to focus on tomorrow. And that's what I'm going to do in my speech today and what I'm trying to do with the race initiative back home.

Mr. Smiley. Mr. President, thank you for your time. It's nice to see you.

The President. Thank you. It's really good to see you.

NOTE: The interview was recorded at approximately 3 p.m. at the Cape Grace Hotel for later broadcast on "BET Tonight." In his remarks, the President referred to President Nelson Mandela of South Africa. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 26 but was embargoed for release until 6 a.m. on March 27. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.